

## Selecting student teachers

How do we select the best student teachers from those who apply to our institutions? What are the attributes and experiences we are looking for and how do we identify them in our interview processes?

The TTA Requirements are a framework within which we work, but we can implement them in various ways. Involvement of partner schools is a requirement, but it is not easy to achieve this – it can be difficult to arrange interviews to take place in schools, or to get school based tutors to come to the HEI to interview with us. It can also be useful to ask school based tutors to take part in the process at an earlier stage, when deciding which applicants to interview.

### Selection for interview

The GTTR form contains a wide range of information which might help you decide who to interview:

- Degree subject, class and institution. Those with overseas degrees will need to be checked as to whether their qualification is equivalent to a UK degree.
- School education. You may be concerned about A level grades and other qualifications gained at school, or in later life.
- Choice of institutions and subjects. Do you have expectations about them putting your institution first? What is your view about candidates who may have been rejected before the application has got to you (of course other courses may have been full)? Some candidates may have applied to different subjects in different places (for example, mathematics to you and science somewhere else) – how do you feel about this and what does it mean about their commitment to mathematics?
- Personal statement. The most important part of the form! What do they say about themselves, why they want to teach, why they want to teach **mathematics** in particular and what their relevant previous experiences have been? Do they show enthusiasm, passion and a realistic understanding of what teaching is all about? How effective is their written communication? What about their level of literacy?
- Previous relevant experience. Does this add to their personal statement? This might give you a fuller picture of their history – but might be very limited if they are new graduates or still doing their degree.
- Reference – is this an academic reference or a personal one? You may wish to call for a second reference if you think this is important.
- Country of residence. Will the student form part of your target number of student teachers or will they be deemed 'overseas'? You may also need to discuss the implications of this in terms of fees if you do interview them.
- Criminal record. Although the CRB check will deal with this later, be aware of whether you can foresee any problems which you may want to discuss at interview.

### Interviews

How can we improve the chances of selecting the candidates who will make the best teachers? We need to recognise the limitations of what we can achieve in an interview, because student teachers change and learn so much during their first experiences of teaching that we can't predict with certainty how they will react to this. But we can draw on our experiences of effective teachers to select those whose characteristics and previous experiences indicate will be most likely to succeed. This is a difficult process because there is a very wide range of what is effective – there is not an 'ideal candidate'. We need to be open to the potential of people who may seem different in their approach from what we might expect.

Interviewing with a mentor from a partnership school (school based tutor) is very helpful as is interviewing with a colleague so that perceptions can be shared and joint decisions arrived at. Some activities which you might want to include in your interview process include:

- A group mathematical activity in which a small number of candidates work together on a task in which they need to communicate their mathematical ideas to one another to solve a problem. This gives an opportunity to see how candidates work together, how they listen, how they support others, etc. If they are then asked to, as a group,

reflect on and evaluate the way the group worked you can listen to how they contribute to this discussion.

- Writing a short piece on, for example, what mathematics is for them. This allows you to look at how they write independently and express their ideas as well as what they feel about mathematics. But remember that ideas about mathematics change a lot during the process of becoming a teacher – so don't be surprised if ideas are quite 'naïve' at this point.
- Reflecting on a piece of writing about mathematics education which you have sent them in advance. You may want to choose this to allow them to express some of their understanding of classroom issues, or more general issues, such as examinations, gender issues, setting, etc.
- If you are interviewing in a school you may be able to observe a lesson with a candidate and then discuss their perceptions. Or you may be able to ask candidates to observe lessons and ask the class teacher for feedback on the candidate's engagement with children and/or the mathematics.
- A short presentation of a piece of mathematics which interests them

The questions we want to ask are likely to be divided into the broad headings of 'Why mathematics?' and 'Why teaching?' but these are likely to be addressed more productively through questions which allow candidates to talk about real experiences and reflect on what they have learned from them. For example, you might ask a candidate to bring to mind a teacher who they felt was effective for them and to describe that person's characteristics. They could then reflect on their own characteristics and in what ways they are similar and different from the person they have described.

Candidates will need to have had some recent experience in school and you can ask them what they saw which interested or surprised them. What did they like or not like? If they have not been able to get into school before the interview you are likely to need to ask them to do so and then to contact you to tell you what they have learned from it. You may ask them to write a report of their visit, or may want to see them again.

You may want to ask them to think about how they could share some of the mathematics they have used with pupils. Can they think about how to transform their mathematical knowledge in this way so as to make it accessible to pupils?

You do not have to make a decision straight away and if in doubt it may be worth sleeping on it.

It is not unreasonable to ask a candidate to do more work on their mathematics subject knowledge:

- the first year of a 2 year PGCE or a TTA funded subject enhancement course for candidates with potential but insufficient mathematics in their academic background
- a TTA funded 2 week subject knowledge booster course for those who haven't studied mathematics for some time
- Brushing up on GCSE and A level mathematics by working through revision texts

Similarly you may want to ask a candidate to gain more experience of school and/or work with young people:

- visit to school
- attend a TTA funded taster course
- do some voluntary work with young people e.g. youth club, sport, faith group, drama, music or some other activity...

Becoming a teacher is hard enough and you need to be confident that if offered a place the candidate has the commitment, motivation and realism to be successful. The course is NOT the place to find out whether or not teaching is 'for you'. Having said that there is always a drop out from courses – nationally about 20%. Which just goes to show how hard it is to get it right!

This document is available at: <http://www.itemaths.org.uk/articles/> (art019)